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# The Dance of the Hummingbirds

BY EILEEN BOYLE | AS PUBLISHED IN THE NEWS JOURNAL AUGUST, 2010

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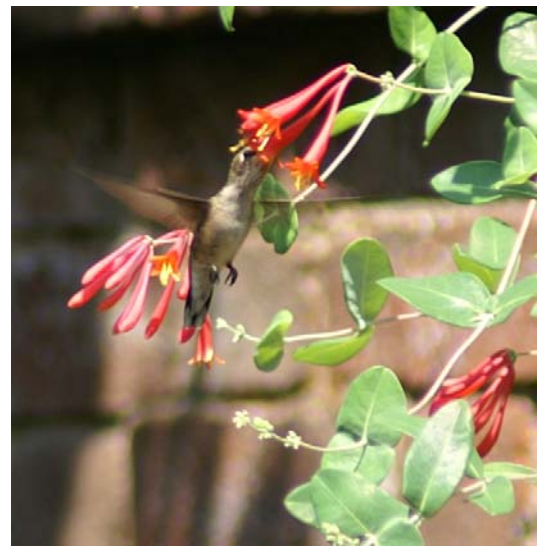
At sunrise, I am awakened by the cheerful chirping and insistent chatter of hummingbirds outside my bedroom window. Aroused from a self induced torpor that lowers his temperature and heartbeat, the hummingbird will be searching for food, sugary nectar and bugs, all day. The dance of the hummingbirds has begun. The principal dancer in this garden recital is the iridescent green male Ruby-throated hummingbird, so called because of the beautiful red jewel-like gorget he proudly wears like a bib. The female is not as resplendent for she only possesses a simple white belly. Juveniles and females look alike. This species of hummingbird is the only one found east of the Mississippi River, although 14 other species are indigenous to western North America. These birds spend their winters in warmer climes. The little feisty male returns to my backyard stage in April from his overwintering haunts in Central America. Here he stakes out territory near a food source and a mate. .

## The Dance for Territory

The Ruby-throated male is 3.5 inches of aerobic ferocity, and one of nature's greatest athletes. He can fly forward and backward, even upside down. His life is played in fast forward, whizzing ahead with dives at 60mph, zigging and zagging, arching his back, flaring his tail and chasing his competitors away, while chirping all the while. Seen in slow motion these aerial behaviors might resemble a ballet, but in fast motion it is an aviator's dogfight.



*Juvenile male rub-throated hummingbird.*



*Sipping on trumpet honeysuckle.*

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A hummingbird can hover, making figure eights with his wings floating strategically near a flower. He dances a complicated choreography that requires lots of energy and requires him to eat every ten minutes, the time it takes for a flower to reboot their nectaries. While hovering, he laps up nectar like a cat with a long forked, grooved tongue. Though looking more like a bug than a bird, his wings beat 50-75 times per second giving the hummers their name.

He will defend a feeder and flowers, establishing multiple perches to survey and protect his kingdom. From his watchful branch, his alert head darts to and fro like a rhythmic metronome keeping beat in his vigilance. At the sign of another hummingbird he races in, charging at the intruder and engaging him in a pirouette of vertical flight, only disengaging when his dominance is established. His supporting cast is the female hummingbirds and her two juvenile offspring, newly fledged from the nest. Right now hummingbird feeders and gardens are abuzz with multiple hummer families hungrily competing for the nectar resources they need to make the long migration home to Costa Rica. Put up multiple feeders (filled with one part sugar to 4 parts water) to multiply the number of hummingbirds in your troupe. Hummingbirds also consume insects, opening their beaks wide and slapping them shut as the bug flies in. As the rivalry for the food source increases, the male Ruby-throat knows a lost cause, gives up his defense and migrates south at the end of the summer. The females and juveniles will stick around a little longer bulking up before they fly south.

#### The Mating Dance

The courtship dance for hummingbirds usually only lasts a few minutes, but is a remarkable pas de deux. It consists of the female sitting on a twig being mesmerized by the male who completes an amazing aerial display swinging wildly like a ten-foot pendulum with buzzing wing beats at the bottom of the arc. If the male has successfully enticed the female, copulation is soon to follow. The female builds her nest from plant down, glues it together with spider webs and camouflages it with lichen. She builds the walnut-sized nest near water, on the downward branch of a tall tree and lays two tiny eggs. She incubates and fledges the young by herself and about six weeks after courtship the family is back competing with the father in his own territory. It is not uncommon to see three hummingbirds at the same feeder this time of year, the mother introducing her two young.

#### The Dance of the Flowers

Since the life style of a hummingbird is supported by a high energy requirement, these tiny birds must consume half their weight in nectar and insects each day. Supplying a variety of seasonal blooms will encourage hummingbirds in your garden and provide you with continuing avian antics. Hummingbirds are initially attracted to red tubular flowers, but once in your garden, they will avail themselves of any plant that has abundant nectar. Many red tubular flowers rely on hummingbirds for pollination, since bees don't find them attractive.



*Hummer approaches lobelia.*



*Iridescent green feathers on hummingbird .*



*Male with gorget.*

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The pendulous nature of many tubular flowers encourages a hummingbird to sip from below. Many of these tubular flowers have the male stamen, the source of pollen, in a place where it will hit the head of the hummingbird. Pollen picked up on the head and bill of one flower is then placed on the stigma of the next female flower parts like putting a sword in a sheath.

Here are some of my favorite plants for hummingbirds. **Red Buckeyes** (*Aesculus pavia*) and **wild columbine** (*Aquilegia canadensis*) both supply early season flowers to hummingbirds returning from their spring migration. The **trumpet-creeper vine** (*Campsis radicans*) provides orangey-red nodding flowers during the middle of the summer, but should only be planted where there is room for the aggressive vine to spread.

Hummingbirds simply can not resist the cherry-hued summer magnet of **Cardinal flower** (*Lobelia cardinalis*). It is often found by a lakeshore, but will do well in any rich garden soil. It forms a stunning crimson, spiky flower subtended by a basal rosette of leaves. It may act like a biennial -reseeding and moving around your garden.

**Bee balm** (*Monarda didyma*) is a rambunctious perennial that produces scarlet tubular flowers on top of fragrant mint-like square stems. If too happy, it can spread. The solution is to shovel up some and give them to your friends so they can have hummingbirds too.

If you were only going to plant one hummingbird plant, make sure it is **trumpet honeysuckle** (*Lonicera sempervirens*). Trumpet honeysuckle occurs in my woods growing up a tree in a slow dignified manner. It is semi-evergreen in Delaware and climbs by twisting on to structure or other plants. It flowers from early spring until frost, almost constantly blooming with narrowly cylindrical wine red flowers. Who needs a hummingbird feeder when you have trumpet honeysuckle?

So fill your garden with red tubular flowers and you can lose your alarm clock for a chirping hummingbird. It definitely beats a rooster!

Happy gardening.



*Injured hummingbird fits in the palm of my hand.*



*Injured hummingbird encouraged to feed. It later flew away.*



## About the Author

EILEEN BOYLE, PUBLIC PROGRAMS MANAGER

Eileen is the Public Programs Manager at Mt. Cuba Center. Previously she was the director of horticulture at the Philadelphia Zoo and the New York Botanical Garden. She has also worked as a horticulture professor, an administrator for the New York City's parks, and for the U.S. Department of Agriculture.